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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE BIOGRAPHY OF AN AMORIST¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

WE have Mr. Theodore Dreiser's word for it that Eugene Witla was charming—and indeed he must have been, with his black hair, his dark, almond-shaped eyes, his straight nose, his chin "shapely but not aggressive," his white and even teeth, which showed with a curious delicacy when he smiled. Eugene—who was troubled with anaemia and a weak stomach—was moody and artistic; moreover, he had emotion, fire, longings, that were "concealed beneath a wall of reserve"; for he was proud and shy and sensitive, and very uncertain of himself. Before he became metropolitan and commercialized, he affected a loose, flowing tie, a soft turn-down collar, and a brown corduroy suit, the coat cut with a belt, like a shooting-jacket. His hands were very thin and white, and he wore a black iron ring of curious design.

The trouble with Eugene was that he was dominated all his life by an idea. As Mr. Dreiser states it, this idea was "the perfection of eighteen." Put thus compactly, the utterance is slightly cryptic; but no one can read far in the history of Eugene's career without understanding it with entire clearness. The truth is that Eugene was pursued by an inescapable dream. The dream was Woman—Girlhood, rather: lovely and youthful Girlhood, preferably virginal, though this was not an indispensable requisite. "That blossoming of life in womanhood at eighteen!—there was no other thing under the sun like it to him." Mr. Dreiser's phrase for it is classically familiar: Eugene, he tells us, was in love with love, and so "there was no permanent faith in

¹The "Genius." By Theodore Dreiser. New York: John Lane Company, 1915.

him for anybody—except the impossible she.” But Eugene was an artist, and his *libido sexualis* was complicated by æsthetic needs and prepossessions. Like Idas in Mr. Phillips’ *Marpessa*, he was “wounded by beauty”—that Ideal Beauty which has ever perturbed all poets and mystics of sensuous imagination. “You couldn’t love any woman long,” wrote poor little Ruby Kenny to Eugene when she saw that he was through with her—and Ruby was only an artist’s model out of the Chicago slums, who could not possibly have read Plato or Rossetti or Havelock Ellis or George Moore or Mr. Yeats or even Mr. Dreiser,—all of whom have understood and expounded this matter. Long after he had begun to acquire experience and to precipitate tragedy, Eugene discovered the writings of Mr. Yeats. Perhaps he wondered at the similarity between himself and Michael Robartes, who, in loving a woman, loved not really herself, but rather an immortal and transcendent beauty of which she was the momentary and wandering incarnation. And what is this, Eugene (or Mr. Dreiser) might say to us, but a quest after that “divine beauty” of Plato, “pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life”?

It must be said for Eugene that he did his best to achieve this ideal, which he had himself candidly defined. “That is the one great thing in the world—the beauty of girlhood,” he observed to himself as he watched young Frieda Roth standing against a lattice of spring leaves, with some house-martins flying above her against the morning sky. The world, he realized, said one life, one love. Could he accede to that? Could any one woman satisfy him? Could Frieda, if he had her? He did not know . . . “only this walking in a garden of flowers—how delicious it was!”

His propensities had been accelerated by seeing at a Chicago art exhibition a nude by Bouguereau. This picture spoke irresistibly to him of passion and beauty, “love of form, love of desire.” Bouguereau, Mr. Dreiser tells us, “painted with a sense of the bridal bed in the foreground”; and so it was perhaps fitting that Angela Blue, whom Eugene met soon afterward during a visit to his home town, Alexandria, Illinois, was the girl whom he eventually married—though not without intervening adventures.

It must not be supposed that Eugene’s marriage brings us within sight of the end of Mr. Dreiser’s faithful and un-

sparingly detailed chronicle; nor, it need hardly be said, does it indicate the cessation of Eugene's tireless quest. His passion for Frieda Roth, to which we have adverted, was the first to follow his marriage; but we have no intention of lingering upon that, or upon his succeeding adventure with the married siren, Carlotta Wilson. We shall come to his climacteric affair with Suzanne Dale.

Eugene was now close upon forty, affluent, powerful, a darling of the gods. He had long since abandoned his flowing tie, his soft hat, and his "rather indiscriminate manner" of combing his hair. He had made his mark as a painter, and was now radiating glory as the "managing-publisher" of a vast magazine-and-book-producing business in New York. His salary was \$25,000 a year; he had a motor-car, a valet, an apartment on Riverside Drive, and he always carried with him from \$150 to \$300 in cash, besides a small check-book; he rode freely in cabs, lunched at "the most exclusive restaurants and clubs," and consorted with Society upon familiar terms. Angela, though, was not quite so happily placed in what Mr. Dreiser calls "the highest circles," her one weakness being, we learn with profit, that she "lacked the blasé social air."

It was at this point in Eugene's career that he met Suzanne Dale. Suzanne, aristocratic and rich, was at the calamitous age—eighteen. She was radiantly healthy,— "she seemed to have the texture of the water chestnut and the lush, fat vegetables of the Spring." Eugene gave his heart to her at once. There was a midnight love-scene at a country house under a waning moon, amid the humming of insects, the chirping of tree-toads, the calling of birds; Eugene kissed and embraced her, calling her "Flower Face," "Silver Feet," "Myrtle Bloom," "Divine Fire" (Mr. Dreiser is a determined and incurable lyrist). Meanwhile Angela, thinking thus to secure his constancy, had allowed herself to become pregnant, and she was in this unpropitious situation when she discovered her husband's love-affair.

That Eugene's life seems about to fall in ruins as a consequence of the events that crowd upon him in the tragic finale of Mr. Dreiser's narrative, does not mean either that he reforms or that he regrets. Our last sight of him is under a windy November sky, gazing up through the falling leaves at the Milky Way, and thinking to himself what a

“sweet welter” life is—“how rich, how tender, how grim, how like a colorful symphony.” And as he gazed, great dreams welled up into his soul. “‘The sound of the wind—how fine it is to-night,’ he thought.”

Mr. Dreiser's critics have expended much energy in their attempts to classify him definitively. He is a “realist,” says the average appraiser. He is *not* a “realist,” says Professor Stuart Sherman, casting a cold and shrewdly unsympathetic eye over our redoubtable fictionist, but a “naturalist.” To those who have lost something of their early zest for critical categories, the matter will not seem of primary importance. It would perhaps be possible to defend the classification of Mr. Dreiser as a sentimental mystic who employs the mimetic gestures of the realist. Certainly he is an emotional historian with an extraordinarily acute sense of a certain fundamental aspect of reality: he is a master in his comprehension and delineation of sexual emotion. He has no taste; he is grotesquely humorless; his style is amazingly bad; in details of execution he is naïvely crude and uncouth. And yet, despite his rawness and banality and ineptitude, despite his pitiless prolixity, his frequent sentimentality, his stylistic vulgarities and platitudes, his commission of a thousand unforgivable offenses as a literary workman—despite all this, it is hard to read him without being engrossed, and persuaded, and deeply moved. “No ship,” said a great artist and unconquerable foe of sentimentalism, “can set sail without pathos;” and Mr. Dreiser, deliberately or not, has freighted his huge and awkward vessel with enough and to spare of pathos—despite all he can do to spoil its effect, it is at times extreme. He gives you a sense of actuality; but he gives you more than that: out of the vast welter and surge, the plethoric irrelevancies of this cyclopean novel, emerges a sense of the infinite sadness and mystery of human life. But even if you do not feel this, you will agree that Mr. Dreiser's intellectual and æsthetic probity is evident upon every page: no more honest fictionist is writing today in English. He reminds one of Swinburne's indication of the excellence of Byron: “The splendid and imperishable excellence of sincerity and strength.”

LAWRENCE GILMAN.